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ABSTRACT

This paper lists 12 common errors by school officials that can contribute to the failure of school finance elections and briefly discusses each of the errors in turn. These campaign errors include (1) disagreement by school board members over whether or not to hold a financial election, (2) failure to analyze community attitudes before launching a financial campaign, (3) overemphasis on trying to convert "no" voters, (4) lack of systematic campaign planning, (5) surrendering control of the campaign to volunteer citizen's groups, (6) lack of year-round communication with school district residents, (7) use of obscure jargon in explaining the school district's financial needs, (8) bad timing of campaign appeals, (9) lack of two-way communication with school district residents, (10) absence of an overall campaign manager, (11) lack of systematic feedback on citizens' attitudes, and (12) lack of legal advice in drafting ballot measures. (JG)

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DODGING THE DIRTY DOZEN

William J. Banach

School financial issues fail because educators don't understand campaign dynamics. That's a basic fact those of us in education find difficult to accept.

Moreover, we tend to bungle key tasks. And we compound our oversights by neglecting to ask "Why?" when the totals are posted.

This neglect--this stubborn refusal to evaluate results--is the precursor of most financial defeats, and serves as a precipitous prelude to the dirty dozen--twelve reasons school financial issues fail.

The Split Board of Education

Voting four-to-three to hold an election is the kiss of death. Afterall, if we can't make up our minds, how can we expect the public to?

Even one member of the board of education voting against an issue raises numerous credibility questions, e.g., "There must be something wrong!"

Rule one: Avoid the split board at all costs. It is the best reason John Q. can have to vote against the issue.

Failure to Analyze

Folksinger Bob Dylan's classic lyric pronounces: "But something is happening out there and you don't know what it is, do you Mr. Jones?"

We wouldn't dive into a swimming pool without pausing to see if it contained water. A common sense parallel should apply before we launch a financial campaign.

A good starting point is a thorough assessment of previous elections. The opinion poll is an obvious technique, one which should be combined with other year-around analysis (listening) activities to get a clear picture of what the community wants and what the people are likely to support.

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Rule two: Disregard for analysis is a sure-fire way to start your campaign with a fizzle.

Inattention to Strategy

We should identify those who are supportive, make sure they understand the issue and get them to the polls.

We worry too much about the "no" voter, yet study after study says he's awfully hard to convince. The fundamental fact is that some people (publics) are more supportive than others, and it's more productive and easier to find ten "yes" voters than to turn one "no" voter around. Elections are won vote by vote, and where there are some votes there are more votes.

Rule three: Ignore "no" voters. Know in advance how many "yes" voters are needed and go after them.

Absence of a Plan

Campaigns without plans are characterized by "too little too late." This could be called a planning gap--the difference between where you want to go and where you are likely to go if you don't detail your intentions.

Planners take the knowledge gained from analysis and strategy sessions and translate it into an action sequence. This sequence of activity then has to be communicated via a master calendar to everyone involved in the campaign.

Rule four: Lack of planning is the root cause of floundering campaigns. Developing timelines and detailing responsibilities are prerequisites for success.

Putting Citizens in Control

School financial issues are won by meaningfully involved citizens. Why? They are more credible in the neighborhoods than educators, and can more effectively create that "don't be the last kid on the block" feeling throughout the community.

But citizens need direction, and that's why they shouldn't control campaigns.

Campaigns should be citizen led and administratively controlled. There are three basic reasons: First, citizens know even less than educators about campaigning. Second, a good campaign requires full-time effort. Most citizens simply cannot devote the man-hours necessary. Third, administrators can be held accountable for their activities. The campaign coordinator can put the "heat" on an administrator to work harder or smarter... or both. Unfortunately, this is something most citizen volunteers won't tolerate.

Rule five: Citizens should be involved, but not in charge.

Neglecting Year-Around Financial Communication

School financial elections are important, and deserve a continuing commitment. But a common (and justified) citizen complaint is that "... the schools only talk to us when they need money."

Districts with year-around communication programs are the most successful in financial elections. They integrate the what, why, when, for whom and how much of financial communication into their year-around communication plans.

Rule six: It is difficult to be successful unless you commit continuing resources that are up to the job. The enemy is neglect--our neglect.

Jargon

Jargon is the crime of every profession, and educators are particularly guilty when it comes to financial communication. Most of us have a hard time explaining "state equalized valuation," yet it is hooks like this upon which we hang our verbal and printed persentations.

Financial communication should be student-oriented. Whatever we need money for, we need it most for them. Put pictures of kids on your election brochures instead of--you should forgive the thought--"money trees" and floor plans.

Pre-test your literature, and ask yourself: "If I weren't me, would I read this?"

Rule seven: Little words do the best job of telling the story, and they have impact! Use them to talk about student needs.

Ill-Timed Communication

Some school districts still insist on stuffing millage messages in shopping bags at the supermarket, just as Mrs. Jones is being mentally molested by inflated grocery prices.

Properly done, financial communication of a background or "conditioning" nature takes place at strategically times points during the school year. Communication relating directly to the election (The get-them-to-the-polls-on-time-communication) should be reserved for the seven-to-ten day period prior to election day.

Communicate long messages early in the campaign; shorter messages as election day approaches.

Rule eight: An election only lasts one day. On that day the appeal of the issue has to be brighter, bigger and better than at any time during the campaign.

One-Way Communication

Visualize the person receiving your message as the communicator. When he radiates understanding, you have communicated.

Grinding out press releases, brochures and other election literature will prove fruitless unless you go after this feedback.

The opportunity to obtain feedback is one reason organizing financial campaigns by elementary a tendance areas has proven extremely effective. That's where people can best understand how the financial issue will affect them... and their children.

Rule nine: When people ask questions (and you answer them), you're communicating.

Non-Management

Committees are necessary evils. They can't respond quickly and they can't be held accountable. That's why one person should coordinate the campaign. Given appropriate responsibility and authority, he can control what is being done, keep the campaign plan intact and use citizens, consultants or whomever to advise him.

Rule ten: Use committees to perform tasks, and assign a manager to manage.

Disregard for Systematic Feedback

What elements in our environment have changed? We have to know what has been happening "out there" since our first analysis. We have to have answers to questions like: How are people responding to the information we've been providing? What do they and don't they understand? In short, are we communicating?

Systematic feedback will tell us what effect we've been having, and identify necessary mid-course corrections. It also discourages "seat-of-the-pants" decision-making, and muffles those pessimists who keep hearing that "... everybody is against us."

Rule eleven: Systematic feedback is critical. Without it we may inadvertantly turn 90 degrees from our audiences.

Ignoring Legal Counsel

A superintendent in the midwest recently ran a superb campaign, passing a bond issue to build a new high school. One hooker: an improperly worded ballot meant the district could sell the bonds, but couldn't use the money to construct the high school. Back to the voters!

Even ballots that are properly worded can contribute to defeat. Avoid confusing legal language by consulting with your attorney. Use the ballot as yet

another channel for explaining that the "three mill increase" described on the ballot is really a renewal. It is possible to say what you mean (if only in parentheses).

Rule twelve: Check everything--twice!

So that's the dirty dozen. Dodge them like deficit budgets. Alone or in any combination, they can destroy an otherwise well-run campaign.

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